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CHAPTER VIII
POLITICAL HISTORY OF NUPE KINGDOM
(*continued*)

THE FEUDAL STATE

WE have seen how in the history of the kingdom a certain territorial nucleus evolved, an area of 'Nupe proper'. This concept of a territorial 'nucleus' also forms the basis of the division of the country for the purpose of government. For the purposes of political, judicial, and tax administration the kingdom was divided into four zones. First, the area of the conquered tributary countries outside the boundaries of the 'kingdom proper', in Nupe terminology, the countries of the *zaži kati*, the 'Outside Peoples'. Second, within these boundaries, an innermost core, the countries of Beni and Kyedye; having formed the nucleus of the rising kingdom they are now assigned the privileged position of royal domains. The third zone comprised the wider 'ring' of remaining towns and districts of the kingdom, most of which lie in Trans-Kaduna. Bida town, the seat of the central government, formed an administrative district of its own.

Under the name of Outside Peoples were comprised the conquered territories of Gbari, Gbira, Kamberi, Kakanda, Yagba, Bunu, and certain sections of Nupe (Dibo and Ebe mostly). These districts were not administered fully by the central government. Their political dependence entailed two things: an annual tribute to Bida, and the recognition by other Emirates and chieftainships of the political status of these territories as 'under the protection' of Bida. It was a one-sided 'protection': Bida itself was free to raid her own outside peoples, but no other country could do this or levy taxes in these territories with impunity. The guarantor of these 'treaties' was, in the last instance, the Emir of Gwandu, the highest feudal overlord of all Fulani Emirs in this part of the world.[1] The central government in Bida did not assume jurisdiction over these countries, nor did it interfere in their own political administration. The tribute was paid in slaves and was collected annually by royal messengers, *tuci*, or as they were also called *ajele* (from the Arabic *ajala*, to dispatch), who visited these countries at the head of small armies, ready to quell any disturbance or to bring recalcitrant taxpayers to heel. Of the tribute levied a little more than half went to the king, the rest to the royal messenger. The office of tax-collector in the outside areas of the kingdom was entrusted mostly to the royal nobility, and the districts over which they were put in charge were linked with

[1] Such an 'international' agreement existed, for example, between the *Etsu* Nupe, the *Sarkin Sudan* (the Emir of Kontagora), and the Emir of Zaria with respect to Gbari country. These treaties were not always kept by the parties concerned. Thus the *Etsu* of Agaie used to raid the territories of his brother Emir, the *Etsu* Nupe, and had eventually to be stopped by a big war which was led by the Emir of Gwandu himself.

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636 651 662 certain ranks. Thus *Edukpā*, the Countries beyond the Niger, were always the province of the *Nágya*, the country of the Kamberi of the *Kusódu*, of the Gbari of the *Etsu Gbari*, of the Yagba of the *Makū*, and so on. Political influence, however, could alter the rule, and a rich district would sometimes go to the more powerful royal prince irrespective of his rank. Thus *Etsu* Maliki, to win over the powerful *Kpotū* Abubakari (who became *Etsu* after Maliki's death) transferred the rich fief of *Edukpā* from the *Nágya* to him. Power and the possession of a strong private army was essential for the post of an *ajele*. An *ajele* who failed in his task was dismissed from rank and office and replaced by a 'stronger' man.

635 651 It is no accident that the two royal domains of Nupe kingdom were the two political organizations which embraced the whole tribe, the two small 'states within the State', Beni and Kyedye. The political unification which they had evolved was recognized and utilized by the political administration of the kingdom. These areas were placed directly under the king. The chiefs of Beni and Kyedye acted somewhat as royal agents. Their appointment and succession was subject to the confirmation of the king, and a gift of sandals, a gown, and a turban which he presented to the new *Žitsu* symbolized, as we have seen, the fact that the local chief held his office 'by the grace of the king'. The town-kings of Beni and the *Kuta* of the Kyedye administered law in all cases which came under the category of *gyara*, 'reparation', and were required to refer graver cases, cases involving *sheri'a*, 'judgement', to the central authority—a point to which we shall return later. The town-kings also collected the tax in their areas on behalf of the king. This tax, *edu*, levied in these areas as in the whole kingdom, was in money, thus differing from the *dzankά*, the local tithe in kind. The tax was collected first by the head chief of the district, i.e. the *Kuta* among the Kyedye, and the town-king of Tafiè and (in Fulani times) Bida among the Beni, who placed the money into the hands of the royal tax-collectors appointed for these two royal domains. Of the tax levied in the domains the *Etsu* received two-thirds, the royal tax-collectors and the head chiefs of the two districts sharing between them the remaining third. In the time of *Etsu* Masaba, however, the *Etsu* took all and the town-king of Bida, in order to obtain his share, levied an additional tax of his own. The total tax paid by a Beni village in Fulani times is said to have amounted to £2 under *Etsu* Masaba and £3 under Umaru Majigi; later, under the greedy Maliki, it rose higher and higher till *u de iyaka à*, 'there was no limit'.[1]

000 The rest of Nupe kingdom was divided up into smaller and larger

[1] The Bororó Fulani who came regularly to Nupe with their cattle formed another such royal domain with respect to taxation. The organization of this nomadic group evidently lent itself to no other method of administration. Their tax was collected by their own group head, the *Diko*, and then handed over to the royal tax-collector, who was known as *ɛgba Bororó* (Delegate to the Bororó). He was himself a Fulani, who lived—and is still living—in Bida. When the *Etsu* Nupe recently wanted to buy cattle for his new experimental farms he arranged the deal through the man who used to be *ɛgba Bororó*, making use of the old connexion for the new purpose.

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change in this array does not alter the continued consciousness of identity, but is subsumed in it.

This is, of course, a familiar situation, which ultimately accounts for the continuity (or continued self-awareness) of societies even when their cultural possessions, or for that matter their populations, change. Much will depend on the gradualness and restricted scope of the change; a sudden change in which new modes of behaviour greatly outweigh the 'array' of pre-existing ones may disrupt the continued identity. But it need not always do so. For the process just outlined may also be reversed: the society facing such far-reaching changes may yet fasten on to some particular cultural possession which remained unchanged, and consider it sufficiently relevant to furnish a criterion or symbol of the continued identity. Often, as we know, a creed or some religious observance preserved amidst the changes will prove to have this relevance.

This process, too, can be observed among the Nupe, among the colony of emigrants in Lagos, who have lost nearly every feature of culture, including language, which would normally sustain that awareness of 'being Nupe' or 'still being Nupe'. But they have preserved one traditional cult, the *gunnu*; and they still regard themselves as Nupe (calling themselves either Nupe or, more often, Takpá or Tapa, by the Yoruba name). The two things go together; in discussions, when the people wish to emphasize their tribal identity, they at once mention the possession of this cult which, to them, seems decisive.

Let me say a few words about the Nupe colony in Lagos. It numbers perhaps 5,000 people, both scattered over the outlying hamlets and villages and occupying a special quarter in the city of Lagos.[1] The Nupe settlement is claimed to be of considerable antiquity, going back to the Portuguese era, and to have attained its present important and honoured position towards the end of the last century, when the self-made head of the Lagos Nupe, a certain Gana and a 'noted warrior', was elevated to high rank by the Yoruba town king. This Gana, who incidentally was taken to England to be presented to Queen Victoria, was the grandfather of the present chief of the Lagos Nupe, a man of about seventy. Gana's rank, *Osode*, is still held by his descendants, and with the rank goes the priestship of the *gunnu*, which Gana had somehow assumed. The Lagos *gunnu* is a combination of three rites all subsumed under the same name, the *gunnu* itself, the *ndakó gboyá*, and the ritual of the Chain of Tsoede, the paraphernalia of the three

[1] The Nupe quarter in Lagos is known to everyone; its main thoroughfares are called *Tapa Street* and *Osode Street*, the latter deriving its name from the title held by the head of the Nupe colony (see below).

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rites being stored in the 'House of Osode'. Here, too, the crucial ceremonials take place. For though each Nupe hamlet or village in Lagos Colony performs its own rites and several of them possess their own paraphernalia, the ceremonial in the 'House of Osode' comes first and gives the signal for the other performances. Thus the scattered groups of immigrants are held together through being mobilized in the common religious activity, while the Nupe in Lagos Town form a single congregation in the strict sense of the word. The religious rites thus preserved are therefore more than merely a symbol of tribal identity: they also make this identity concretely effective, that is, turn a group aware of itself into one effectively co-operating, if only on one, crucial and impressive occasion.

As regards the rites themselves, they are full of distortions and unorthodox innovations, due partly to the adaptation of the cult to the urban conditions and partly to genuine misunderstandings, linguistic and otherwise.[1] Yoruba influence, too, is visible, in certain anthropomorphisms which have crept into the interpretation of the *ndakó gboyá*. Altogether, the latter has come to overshadow completely the *gunnu* rites proper: the masks, of which there are seven, are now of two kinds, tall ones representing 'fathers', and smaller ones representing 'sons'; while the *ndakó gboyá* as such, far from being understood as an impersonal force, is positively stated to be a male spirit, and is even given a 'wife', symbolized by an upturned pot half-buried in the ground.

But not all the innovations represent merely errors or distortions of a fortuitous and unwitting kind. Three in particular express the new significance attaching to this ceremonial of a group in exile. First, the cult society of the *ndakó gboyá* has been remodelled into a secret society in the strict sense of the word, rigidly organized, and having its lodges in every Nupe village on the coast. Its head is the *Osode*; its members must be Nupe by paternal descent; and initiation is both difficult and expensive, though once it is achieved it remains hereditary. For the people, the *ndakó gboyá* society is unequivocally, and impressively, a piece of 'Nupedom'. If it is difficult to enter the society, this only means that it has come to represent something like an inner ring or élite among those who can call themselves Nupe; and if the *ndakó gboyá* society is now so planned that it includes every Nupe settlement and perpetuates itself by hereditary succession, this makes it another support of tribal identity.

[1] Thus the dance of the young men is called *gunnu ba*, which really means 'place of the *gunnu*', and the courtyard where the esoteric part of the rite takes place is called *huso*, 'bush'.

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We must note, secondly, that all the Lagos Nupe, without exception, are today Moslems. Oddly enough, they claim to be good Moslems, even though they openly and proudly 'own' the *gunnu* and the other pagan rites. Yet the people see no conflict between the faith they now profess and their adherence to the pagan cults. The two are kept in separate compartments: the Moslem faith belongs to the present; the pagan observances are a token of a past one wishes to continue: they simply go with remaining a Nupe. And if the pagan observances are also supernaturally effective, this seems almost incidental to that other, more relevant, import, of offering occasions to act as Nupe.

Finally, when the Lagos Nupe perform the public episodes of their cults, they do so in the same circumstances in which the alien enclaves in Nupe country stage their religious observances. The *gunnu* and *ndakó gboyá* are watched with keen interest by the whole native population of Lagos; above all, the Nupe 'owners' of the ceremonials are expected to perform them for the well-being of 'the whole town', including the Yoruba, and occasionally at the request of the Yoruba town chief, if some calamity (for example, witchcraft) threatens the population. Here, then, we meet with the exact counterpart of that 'religious division of labour' which turned a cult alien in Nupe into a contribution to the common weal. But the conception of the 'common weal' has been significantly widened; for the prayer formula of the Lagos ceremonials contains a new phrase—'May the whole of Nupe country prosper'. This is clearly a further expression of that 'awareness of social identity', kept alive by a tribe in exile; indeed, no more convincing expression can be conceived than this concern with the welfare of the distant mother country.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The absence, in Nupe, of complete conversions to an alien creed has a notable exception in the steady expansion of Islam. Paradoxically, though the Nupe in strange parts preserve their traditional religion because it is so much the symbol of tribal identity, in Nupe country itself that religion is disappearing. And unlike the Lagos Moslems, who keep Islam and the traditional observances apart, the Nupe in their own country have accepted 'conversion' in all its implications, including the rejection of the earlier creed. Perhaps this is no paradox. For while the emigrants have only their religion to fall back on if they wish to prove to themselves that they are still Nupe, in their own country this issue does not arise. There, Nupe social identity is still sustained by that wider 'stable array' of social facts—unbroken occupation